

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 20 October 2005

Reading

- Thomas J. Csordas, “Somatic Modes of Attention” in *Body/Meaning/Healing*, pp. 241-259.
 - Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Other Selves and the Human World,” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 346-365.
 - Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, “What Do We Mean ‘Human Experience’?” in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, pp. 15-33.
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Continued of last time: Trauma

PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) – argument that it arises when traumatic memory hasn’t been coded properly in the memory

- œ cognitive content and emotional affect both equally inaccessible to the mind
- œ body manifestations of trauma are indications of what hasn’t been processed mentally
- œ still **entertains the body/mind division**

contemporary psychotherapists – **hypnotherapy** can be a means to bypass whatever is blocking the conscious mind, help to reintegrate into everyday consciousness

notion of **repression** challenged by how many victims claim that they have *not* forgotten

- œ some argue that the only group for which repression is possible is children
- œ many argue that repression *does* occur
- œ active debate about it

screen memory – something in the unconscious is covering up real traumatic experience

- œ lay advocates latched onto this notion
- œ therapists used hypnosis as a means to help people who began to wonder what could have happened that could have triggered their symptoms
- œ the idea that certain memories *must* be there (due to outward symptoms/manifestations), e.g. many cases of supposed sexual abuse where there might/might not have been any
- œ relationship b/w psychotherapist and patient – issue of **suggestion**, is it therefore appropriate in a therapeutic context? also harkens back to notions of suggestion and hysteria that were important at turn of 20th century

- *To what extent is the patient being led?*
- *To what extent are they an autonomous participant in a process or does hypnosis force them to deal with this unconscious content?*
- *Does hypnosis actually cure?*
- *Is it important that the patient is actively recovering memories that are repressed or are they coming to terms with the past and being given false memories?*
This has to do with the **agency** of the patient.

Originally when hypnosis was used, it was used on **hysterics** (predominantly women, or those with hysteric character who were considered suggestible or had sensory automatisms – e.g. lower classes, so called “primitives”). This links to ideas of hierarchy of individuals, hierarchy of consciousness, gender issues, race issues, other political ideas about governments.

Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman talks about how hysteric women were put on display in hospitals (where W. James, Janet, Freud worked)

- *To what extent is the hypnotherapist suggesting, or is there some sort of collusion to elicit a certain response?*
- *To what extent does an individual have **agency** over his/her own mind and body?*

There is an acknowledged **power of objects** in the mind, power of images.

- *To what extent does **history** have an effect on the person's **self**?*

From the first William James' reading – **James** posited that an individual can have just as much a response on a bodily level to an *idea* as to something that is materially around him/her.

All these clinicians at same time study were studying **philosophy**:

- *What is the relationship of the discrete autonomous individual and its relation to the external world?* This was a very Western notion of the individual.
- *How is that we can actually study this phenomenon?*
- ∞ **Freud** located what was happening in terms of an individual's experience and what he knows within his own self.
- ∞ There was an acknowledgment that the clinician can interact with the patient to glean what is in the patient's mind.
- ∞ **Descartes** said that individuals can think within their own mind in a very abstract fashion about what is going on in reality – should mistrust senses altogether.

Underlying questions:

- *How is **knowledge** being constructed?*
- *What is view of individual vis a vis their body in relation to external world?*
- *What is the legitimate way to gather knowledge? Through theoretical thought or through engagement with others? How do we think about that engagement?*

Walter Cannon's notion of “voodoo death”: influence of **suggestion** in a social context – theory that the individual's ostracization from society builds up anxiety, hormonal imbalances, can eventually cause death. This **weight of communal sentiment** can have an effect on either the conscious or unconscious level.

Today's material: Somatic Modes of Attention and Intersubjectivity

Eurocentric approach to embodiment – Csordas article address this issue through a different paradigm of embodiment. Psychoanalysis = folk psychiatry of the West for a certain class of people. Csordas asks *to what extent does the healer have to share the same habitus as the patient in order to heal them?*

Do you think if you were in a different culture, you would get sick in the same way?

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

Pre-objective state:

- ∞ MP argued that there is both a **world of nature** and a **world of culture** that exist long before you are ever born.
- ∞ You are born into a **system of meanings** (*cultural world*) and **system of objects** (*natural world*). There is no escape from the objects of culture and nature.
- ∞ By the very fact of being born into the environment that you were born into, you are “trapped” in a sense. You are born into a certain matrix that is physical/cultural/social that patterns **what you think about and how you think about it, how you behave.**

Rather than take the position that there is an objective approach out there, that there is a world of objects independent of us, MP has the counter argument – that on some level, **we only know the world through our bodies.**

In the act of trying to apprehend the world and its objects (**perception is an active engagement** – opposing Descartes who said not to trust senses, to be in mind only), you cannot strip yourself of the cognitive givens/constructs with which we think. But you *can* still “**bracket**” that, be aware of the **influences** that are shaping what you think and how you think.

perception – there is an engagement on some level when perceiving something else such that the **world is still constituted in the individual**

- *How, then, is **communication** possible if we each have our own individual worlds?* this gives us a sense of what we do in practice. when we communicate there is a merging of the other’s subjectivity and our own subjectivity = **intersubjective engagement**

On the contrary, in the realist objective science perspective, the engagement of the researcher is considered completely separate from the object of study. There is no interaction between the knower and the thing to be known, between the I and the Other.

In terms of social theory, this is a crucial question!

- *What is the relationship of an individual to objects in the world?*

THOMAS J. CSORDAS

Csordas is an anthropologist who tried to get away from the mind/body distinction (in the Western paradigm) since the lived experience is not envisioned that way in many cultures.

- *How is it possible to understand the cross-cultural boundaries of others?*
- *What about the role of the body?*
- *Can you just posit this abstract mind as if it were not attached to the rest?*

He argued his theory of **somatic modes of attention**, addressing the ways in which we think about how we live in the world and how we can understand other people’s everyday reality.

Embodiment is the ground of culture, and the body as the primary unit from which we experience the world. This goes back to notion of **pre-objectivity** (Csordas build off MP) – we are all born into cultural systems that influence how we move through space/live/feel even before we can reflect on those things. This is all occurring on an **unconscious** level.

Csordas also talks about ways in which people have thought about what is the best way to study the experience of engagement throughout the world.

He makes a distinction between different representations of the **body as a system of signs**

- ∞ e.g. illness – what symptoms [signs] are there?
- ∞ emphasized that we instead need to look at the *both* the **embodied level of experience** as well as the **everyday lived experience** to find the source of illness

Clifford Geertz

∞ wrote *The Interpretation of Cultures*

∞ said to look at **culture as a text** that you can “read” as easily interpretable

∞ crude, **semiotic** (meaning **systems of signs** that indicate meanings that are important to a particular society) approach at culture.

In contrast, Csordas posits that if we look at **embodiment** instead, it may provide us a **richer way to analyze culture**.

Readings for next time will bring us back to the sensory experience on day-to-day level that it may inform/enrich **ethnography**. Csordas’ piece was pivotal in how we interpret cross-cultural analysis, asking us *what other dimensions should we consider beyond the narrative level when we are trying to understand life experience?*

somatic modes of attention:

- *how do we discuss and analyze the relationships between people?*
- *how do healers notice certain things?*
- *how do you describe the other dimensions that people use to sense things in others?*

Csordas was trying to make room by which we can explain other phenomena that don’t fall into mind/body separation of the Western paradigm.

Holy Ghost film from last time: There were evident jerks of shoulders, jumping up and down, twitches, automatic language during the Pentecostal service – how much of behavior is learned? If we were in the setting and *felt* it, how easy would it be to just sit and watch? This gets to question of **intersubjectivity** – *one person’s experience is in a way communicated to those around them.*

Pierre Bourdieu (and Marcel Mauss)

Bourdieu offered the notion of **habitus** – every cultural group has its own **set of dispositions** that are bodily – affect gesture, affect taste (e.g. clothing), encompasses class distinctions. We are born into a particular **habitus** (similar idea to pre-objectivity and embodiment) that influences us on a very bodily level.

According to Bourdieu, **everyday life** is where we **practice/reproduce bodily dispositions** that we receive and this is how cultural dispositions get reproduced over time. *Doxa* describes forms of practice that become **authoritative/hegemonic**/have most power. *Habitus* is an example of *doxa*, as it is so patterned. **Resistance** is also patterned and is still situated in the *habitus*. *Doxa* describes the orthodox view, while *heterodoxa* = resistance to whatever order of bodily practices there are.

The notions of *habitus* and *doxa* do not allow for much room for **individual agency/power** to transcend the forms into which we are born. If we are imprinted in a certain way, then...

- *How easily can we unlearn our conditioning?*
- *Is resistance really possible if the type of resistance we have is in relation to orthodox order?*

Csordas worked with Catholic Charismatics:

- ☞ anointing – having divine assistance on bodily level to try to heal others
- ☞ word of knowledge – receive info/facts about supplicant through diving communication

- *How do you account for the communication that is occurring?*
- *What is happening between divinity and healer, between healer and supplicant?*

(Side question: *For psychics and the like, is it innate talent or something learned?*)

Csordas also worked with Puerto Rican *espiritismo* healers who were possessed by spirits and then healed supplicants through knowledge or through embodied force.

- *How do you account for realities like these that are very much sensory that don't fall into Cartesian paradigm so that these practices don't look irrational or scary? What a **phenomenological approach** would do is describe the details that are occurring, make sense of them, elicit meanings/interpretations of what it's all about.*

Csordas also discusses non-religious healing settings

- ☞ pulse taking – healer and patient's pulses became one
- ☞ Fijian pregnancy - collective was emphasized, addressed the safety of the social body (n.b. Mary Douglas) and the three bodies of individual, social, and body politic (n.b. Scheper-Hughes & Lock)
- *How do we understand this beyond the discrete boundaries of western conception?*

Transference is interaction of two individuals, patient projects onto clinician and vice versa.

Csordas asks:

- *How do we talk about this type of transference communication?*
- *What means do we have in our methodology/analysis to account for that type of engagement?*
- *How do we think about this intersubjectivity?*

Csordas' *The Sacred Self* – Catholic charismatic healers tried to heal people of pathological memories – **processes of visualization** are used to “revisit” the past and resolve whatever emotions are associated with the debilitating memories

- ☞ discusses experience of religious people, how they **create a relationship** with divine figures in an **imaginal realm** through visualization (figures can be very influential)
- ☞ imaginary realm has effect on individuals even when not in particular state
- ☞ this **shift in consciousness** can be a vehicle for healing

∞ this realm can account for the reality of an exchange between two people

MP brings philosophy and analysis of the world and being **back to the body** (so important in phenomenology!) whereas Descartes *et al.* were thinking of the mind only in an abstract sense. Both address the question of *what perspective does the knower/inquirer take with the external world?* MP asserts that the act of perceiving is a relationship – there is an **intersubjectivity** in the act of perception.

Varela, Thompson, Rosch ask *can we get beyond mind/body if we take a different philosophy?* They relate the **challenges of phenomenology** throughout history – there is **no pragmatic method** to follow to understand people's lived experience.

What we'll see coming up:

So far we've traced the Western paradigm. This theoretical underpinning is applied in anthropology – ethnographers take these ideas and work with them.

- *What is the project of science and how do you do it?*
- *How do you go across cultures and understand sensory/perceptual orders and ways of being in the world?*
- *What constitutes legitimate knowledge?*
- *In what ways must science be objective and rational – how do we exclude influence?*